

# Hard As Nails

BY ROYAL BROWN

## The Cold, Calculating Mind Sometimes Produces the Results That Were Not Anticipated.

ELEVEN THOUSAND DOLLAR roadsters are smooth-running and luxurious affairs. Yet, even so, they need a certain amount of oil in their bearings to keep cool and collected, and of this Tucked D Witt was as well aware as he should be.

Nevertheless, on this warm, sunny June morning, when working his way clear of the tangled traffic of upper New York, he settled himself down to an almost two-hundred-mile race against time, he gave as little heed to the matter of oil as the very best of them might have.

The roadster, almost new, was one of eight cars he owned at that moment, which gives an idea of his financial condition, and perhaps of his mental as well.

This last Kitty Townsend had diagnosed for him when, in March, she had returned to him the pledge of their engagement.

"As near as I can discern," she had said in her smooth and lovely voice, "your idea of an ideal married life is to have me always about ready to hand you a wrench when you need it. Thank you, Tuck, I don't care to play second fiddle to your horrid old motor."

Exquisite is a word that fitted Kitty perfectly. And with reason. She had made it the keynote of her campaign and she stressed it ceaselessly—and exquisitely.

"Your greatest asset," her mother had assured her, "is your air of distinction. Society is full of young boys who are trying to beat men at their own games. Be aloof, different—eternally feminine."

They talked things over together like that. They had a little money and a social background of sorts. By making the most of both they had accomplished much.

They talked Tuck over as coolly with the same eye for the main chance.

"If we had money, I'd prefer a foreign title, of course," her mother had admitted. "But we must have money. And Tuck has social position. We can live abroad a lot—he'll do anything for you, even that, if you manage him."

So it had seemed. From the beginning, Tuck had been blind, but Kitty's undeniable loveliness. She was so wonderfully, cool—these days—unbelievably feminine.

Her beautiful hair was unobbed. She did not ride horseback. She smoked, but as one who performs a pretty feminine rite. She drank, but only famous vintages decorously served.

"And she's not—oh, hard as nails!" was his final tribute.

"I hate his hands," Kitty had remarked. "They look like a mechanic's."

"You can manage about that after you marry him," her mother had assured her. "And he is charming in his way. Take my advice and take him!" And Kitty had taken him in December, only to shake him in March.

THEY had been motoring through Westchester. A dog of no pedigree and less manners had run out, snapped at the front tires. Tuck had swerved to avoid hitting him, and then he had smiled at Kitty.

"Why didn't you run right over him?" she had demanded.

The smile had lingered in his eyes until he had realized that she actually meant it. He had recoiled, instinctively, and she, as instinctively, had promptly pressed home a purely feminine point.

The way you swerved might have wrecked the car and killed me," she had insisted. "Which only proves that you care more for me than for me!"

And so on to the return of his ring—and the end of the world. It made little difference to Tuck what he did then, and so he went off with Preston Colt. Preston Colt had an insatiable curiosity about unexplored places; at the moment the headquarters of the Amazon fascinated him.

"I need a better mechanic than I can afford to hire to keep the scow I've chartered moving," he had assured Tuck. "We'll be back by June and she'll have plenty of time to miss you and be sorry."

When Tuck returned to New York he found it had not worked out that way.

"You look as if you'd had tropical fever," one of his kind friends had assured him. "Are you going to Kitty's wedding tomorrow?"

This last had taken time to percolate. Kitty's marrying Leonard Hood!

In his own apartment he smoked furiously, cigarette after cigarette. At half-past 9 he had put in a long-distance call to her.

"This is Miss Townsend," came, at last, her cool voice.

"It's me, Tuck, Kitty dear," he had begun. "Oh, Kitty!"

From that point he floundered along, until she hung up on him. Thereupon he flopped into a chair. "Oh gosh!" he groaned. "I've messed things up worse than ever!"

Yet Kitty, leaving the phone, wore an expression her mother could not fathom.

"It was Tuck," Kitty explained, and her mother's eyes grew startled.

"Kitty," she gasped. "You aren't considering—"

"But the guests—the presents. You can't change your mind now—"

"I can be sick! I'm not an utter fool—I'm too much your daughter for that!"

Of that Tuck had no inkling. He had paced the floor until dawn came. At that point the need of action became definite. He called up his garage. Twenty minutes later he was on his way to the Berkshires, a modern Lechnivar with a thoroughly modern steed.

The miles whirled behind him. At 10 o'clock, without warning, the roadster stopped. His nose, tardily, told him why.

THE roadster had stopped almost abreast of a farmhouse. Before this stood a car which bore the imprint of its maker as unmistakably in its lines as it did on the radiator. The owner of this lifted his head from under its hood and greeted him.

"Out of gas?" he asked.

"What?" Tuck asked.

"Bearing's burned out. And say, does that machine of yours run? I'll give you three hundred for it."

The owner had expected two. "Make it three and a quarter," the man said, automatically. "And—"

"Done! Hitch a team to my car and drag it into your barn. I'll pay for that later."

"Sure," said the other. He cast a cautious glance about and then produced a pint flask. "This," he announced, "ain't none of that bootleg stuff, but good corn whisky. Help yourself—and luck to you."

Tuck took a swallow.

"I need it," he remarked, meaning luck.

"Take it with you," offered his benefactor, meaning the whisky. "Plenty more where it came from."

"The old boat has got a bit of life left in it at that," Tuck decided. "I wonder if it can beat forty."

In a few minutes he discovered that it could actually turn out fifty or thereabouts. And that fact, allied perhaps with the swallow of whisky he had taken on an empty stomach, made him feel pleasantly exhilarated.

"I'll make it, all right," he thought. "Less than thirty miles now."

The next instant he jammed his brakes, made an ineffectual effort to swerve to the right, and then, amid a whirling of wheels, plunged through chaos into unconsciousness.

In a minute—so it seemed—he opened his eyes. Then he blinked rapidly. But the illusion remained. He was in bed, with the sun-bright, warm, benignant—streaming through dormer windows. He strove to fathom this mystery, and then, as memory flashed back to him, he started to get up.

"I'd advise you to stay where you are," suggested a cool, uncompromising voice. "I've taken your clothes and hung them out to air. I only hope for your sake that no revenue officers use this road today."

Tuck turned. In the doorway stood a black and white dog, looking at him with a stare that was as feminine as the voice that had given him pause.

"I remember hitting something," he began, confusedly.

"Do you really?" Her voice mocked him. "I'm surprised. My chicken coop is pretty well demolished and so is your car, but I have an idea you were too drunk to remember anything."

"Drunk!" he protested, utterly amazed.

"So drunk, I should say, as to have escaped injury altogether," she went on.

Entering the room with swift, assured step, she crossed to a chair, picked up a flannel shirt and a pair of faded overalls and tossed them to the bed.

"Now that you are feeling better," she said, "you can put these on and start repairing the chicken coop."

Tuck stared at her incredulously. "One of us is crazy," he assured her. "I'm a minute to lose. I—Great Scott! What time is it?"

"Half-past nine," she echoed and glanced about. "Why, it should be dark if it's as late as that—"

"You've been here all night," she explained. "I looked in last night and earlier this morning but you were still—unconscious, shall we say?"

Kitty had been married. Tuck was utterly overwhelmed. A woman's intuition should have guessed that; a woman's eyes could hardly have looked upon him save with pity.

But this vindictive young female was implacable.

"If you are handy with tools," she said, "it will take you a possibly week to repair the damage you have done. In any event, between that and going to jail—"

"Jail!" Tuck repeated.

"In Massachusetts that's where they are sending young men who insist upon operating automobiles when under the influence of liquor—"

"But Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "I wasn't! I hadn't even had a drink! Except that is, just one," he concluded.

She shrugged skeptical shoulders. "You can tell that to the judge if you prefer."

"And, anyway, I'll pay for the coop—"

"Oh, money you won't. Labor is one thing money won't buy these days. Not on a farm. If you're a reasonable young man you'll do exactly as I say. Think it over!" And thereupon she departed.

After all, what difference did it make what he did or where he went? Life now stretched before him endlessly, emptily. And as he dressed and descended to the kitchen, there he found his captor washing dishes.

TO some men, in spite of a cool hardness about her, she might have seemed not unattractive. She was young, straight and supple, and her bobbed hair was colorful, a warm chestnut with bronze glints in it. Tuck, however, assured himself he had seldom seen any girl so utterly devoid of charm. As he finished his coffee the telephone rang. He could not escape hearing her end of the conversation.

"Absolutely not!" she said. "I've said that before and I mean it."

"A regular little Tartar—hard as nails!" Tuck decided.

From the telephone she turned to him.

"There's some lumber stored in the barn. I'll show you where it is and you can start work at once."

His first glimpse of the damage he had wrought had startled him. Then immediately it became a challenge.

At noon, when she went to summon him to dinner, he had made famous progress. She noted that, but all she said was: "Dinner is ready. And don't pay any attention to Clem. He's just a half-witted, old fellow, but he is half-witted. Just now he resents you and is inclined to be suspicious."

Of the latter there could be no doubt. The loose-jointed, leathery-faced hired man gave Tuck a furtive, bustling glance.

"Clem," said his mistress sharply. "The dog is magical. 'Haw!' muttered Clem, and subsided.

"She'd make a darn good animal trainer," thought Tuck. "I wonder how she gets that way?"

If, when Ann Duncan was twenty, her father had not surrendered to the sophistry that suicide was the only solution of the mess he had made of his life, Ann at twenty-four would not have been as she was.

She and her brother Bobby, who was five years younger, were already motherless. Bobby must continue in school and then go to Yale. That was absolutely final. But how?

While the problem still pressed, an abandoned farm on a still more abandoned real estate agent had suggested possibilities. So here she was, an abandoned farmerette. If she had been less determined of spirit she would have quit long ago.

Instead, she had made herself a match for the men she dealt with and she drove as hard bargains as they did. As for the real estate agent, he was in Yale anyway. To some that might have seemed a poor return for all her effort.

Tuck returned to the reconstruction of the chicken coop promptly, working the afternoon through, pausing only to fill his pipe now and then, or take a trip to the kitchen for a glass of water. On one such trip, he surprised Ann about to take a kettle of water from the stove. And was surprised in turn because she had discarded her khaki and wore what seemed to be an ancient evening cape. This had once been a magnificent shade of green of some material both soft and rich, and there were still bands of dusky fur at the wrists and collar.

Now, apparently, she used it as a bathrobe.

"Please don't bother," she commanded as he sprang automatically to relieve her. "I'm used to waiting on myself."

Yet even as she squealed Tuck she turned back to him. "But there is one thing you can do for me," she said. "You can give me your promise to stay here and help Clem until I get back—"

"Until you get back?" he echoed.

"I've got to go to New Haven. My brother is at Yale and I'm afraid that he is—sick. Clem will take the milk to the station as usual, but he must have some help. Can you milk a cow?"

Tuck—before whom life stretched empty and endlessly—actually grinned.

"I've never had any experience, but I might be able to achieve the art."

"It's simple enough, if you don't irritate the cow—"

"I'll try not to," said Tuck meekly.

"Thank you. I'll see that you are properly paid, of course."

"And anyway it will be much better than being sent to jail," he reminded her. And then, remembering her brother, he added, hastily—being Tuck: "I didn't mean to rub it in—of course I'll be glad to do whatever I can."

In a moment of less stress she might have pondered that. As it was she bathed, dressed and departed, all within the hour.

"Don't try to talk to Clem—it just confuses him," she advised Tuck. "He'll manage to make you understand what he wants done. He'll prepare supper as soon as he comes back from the station and then he'll go to bed. If you care to use it, the library is at your service."

THE soft dusk swallowed her up, an engine whirled off and he was alone. He hesitated, and then turned to the library. This he had noticed before. The room had impressed him in spite of its shabbiness. The great old fireplace with its MacIntyre mantle

was flanked by bookshelves. Over this dimly luminous in the half light hovering beyond the lamp's shaded radiance, hung a portrait in oil. This was very good, though his surprise at that was submerged in a greater surprise, for it pictured a beautiful, smiling woman in a formal gown with train—English court dress, he thought.

Then, suddenly, it recalled Kitty to him—not that he had forgotten her, but he had—and abruptly he turned away.

Then he thought of Ann as she had looked when departing. "She can look darn attractive when she wants to."

"Haw!" said a voice behind him. They stepped together in silence.

And then, Clem went to bed while Tuck, who would have been wise to do likewise, returned to the library. Presently the clock on the mantel began to strike. He glanced up. Eight o'clock. Last night at this time—no, two nights before at this time—he had just finished talking to Kitty. She was yet to be married then. Now?

"It would have been better if I had smashed myself up as thoroughly as I did that old flier," he decided.

The first rays of dawn were lighting the east as he and Clem finished breakfast. And the last glow of sunset was still streaking the west when he fell into his bed that night. He knew then why folks on a farm go to bed early.

"I hope," he thought, "that Clem will oversleep in the morning. I'm darned sure I will—that little red jersey sure has a mean disposition. I wonder—just what—she has—against me—"

That was his last waking thought: the thought which should have been consecrated to Kitty. Especially as she, at that precise moment, was thinking of him—and with deep emotion, too.

"I trust," her mother was raging. "that you are satisfied. Everybody is talking. They know that Tuck talked to you over the phone, and if you think Leonard Hood can be treated this way—"

"Oh, shut up!" snapped Kitty unflinchingly.

But she realized she had been foolish. She had counted on Tuck's rushing to her, making any and all concessions to regain her. She wondered where he could have gone to.

At the headquarters of the Amazon Tuck had not been able to forget Kitty. But at the headquarters of the Amazon there hadn't been twenty cows and a chicken coop.

Kitty, impossible! But there were moments when she—well, slipped from her mind. His activities seemed to him terrific. The moment one thing was finished, something else clamored to be done.

"I only hope," he thought, "that I won't be as half-witted as Clem by the time the young ogre returns."

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A SOUND caused him to turn. In the sunlit doorway of the cow shed stood a dog such as may be seen almost anywhere save at a dog show.

Now he stood, one forepaw uplifted, poised for flight should that prove advisable. But his ridiculous tail and his floppy ears broadcasted hope and good will.

"Please, sir," queried his tail, "are you willing to be my friend?"

Then, caution to the winds, he flung himself upon Tuck. And that was not because Tuck had eight automobiles and at least as many millions. Or even because he looked kind. In fact, he looked like a pirate, for he had not shaved since he arrived. Yet the dog knew!

"Well, well," said Tuck. "Where did you come from?"

The dog was obviously half-starved.

"I've got an idea," Tuck went on, in exactly the tone and manner every dog dreams of, "that you care more for milk than I do. How about it?"

"Anything," the dog replied—ob-

viously, "that pleases you please me."

"Let's go to it, then," suggested Tuck. "I don't know what the lady who runs the place would say about it, but we should worry—she's away until further notice."

But she wasn't. She was talking over the telephone in the kitchen. "You can have the pair of them for four hundred dollars—cash," she was saying. "I must have the money at once."

Then she hung up the receiver and, turning, saw him.

"I didn't know you had come back," he said in a low voice. "And I brought the dog in. He's hungry. Do you mind if I give him something to eat?"

"Of course not," she assured him. Yet he felt a swift anger against her. She had barely glanced at the dog. He could not understand how any woman could be so utterly devoid of sympathy.

"Thanks," he said and hoped she'd catch the sarcasm.

But she missed it altogether. She had already changed back to her masculine gear. As Tuck poured some milk into a saucer she moved swiftly about the kitchen. She looked pale and very tired. When she suddenly turned to him he noticed the lilac shadows under her eyes.

He should have told you at once how much I appreciate your staying and helping. Please forgive me. I've had a hard trip and—many things to think of."

"Your brother"—Tuck wondered suddenly if in his interest in the dog he had not seemed unsympathetic to her. "Did you find him very ill?"

"Not very," she said, her lips tightening.

Tuck stared as she turned away. "Good Lord," he thought. "Does she resent his sending for her for anything less than a deathbed scene?"

Later he was to be still more puzzled when he came suddenly upon Clem standing before a silver framed picture which Tuck had noticed and which he had guessed was of Bobby.

"Haw!" Clem exclaimed, and then shook his fist violently at the picture.

"Everybody is a little bit crazy here," murmured Tuck. "I'll be slipping next, Joseph, old top." Joseph was his new friend. Then abruptly, "By George," he thought, "I'll bet that Bobby has gotten himself into a scrape."

He had been to Yale himself.

Besides, that would explain the mystery—Ann's return and the sale of two valuable rows. Clem's pantomime assault upon Bobby's picture.

"Well," Tuck decided, finally and wisely, "it's none of my business anyway."

Nevertheless, when he came into the kitchen just before supper he did study Ann with quickened interest.

"By the way," she remarked, breaking in on this. "I'll not hold you to the chicken coop deal, but I want and I was determined to make you fix it. But I imagine I may have been unfair. Your family and friends—"

"I'm going to finish the chicken coop or bust. Tuck cut in forthrightly. "I'm for family and friends. I haven't much of the first, and I imagine the rest are busy with their own affairs. I—"

There he paused, his nice young mouth tightening as he thought of Kitty. As for Ann, she gave him a quick glance but said nothing.



IT WAS ANN WHO REACHED THE ROAD FIRST.

He wondered if he might drop a reassuring hint about Bobby.

"I'm not further," Joseph shot by him barking furiously. A heavy roadster had come into sight. At it Joseph flung himself, with all the ardor of a Don Quixote.

"One of these days he'll get run over," remarked Ann.

"I imagine that wouldn't bother you very much," he suggested.

To Tuck, her remark had come like a dash of cold water, reminding him of what she was—hard as nails!

Ann looked up at him, wide-eyed. Then:

"Why should it?" she demanded. Before he could answer there came an agonized shriek from the road.

IT was Ann who reached the road first. Sinking to her knees, she drew Joseph to her and ran swift, intuitive fingers over him while he pitifully strove to lap her hand with his tongue.

"I think there's nothing broken," she babbled. "But I'm afraid he's hurt internally. Oh, how could this Tuck, hot with anger, straightway turned to demand of the roadster's driver.

"If," the stranger began, "you'd teach your mongrel better manners—"

"I," proposed Tuck, "intend to teach you better manners right now!"

Instead, he stopped short, incredulous of eyes, perfectly motionless. And Kitty it was, Kitty as exquisite as ever, as ideally feminine. Seated beside the driver, whom he now recognized.

"Tuck!" What on earth—?

There she bit her lip. Involuntarily her eyes grew calculating and for an instant it was as if Tuck saw to her very soul, saw it—hard as nails!

As she caught his change in expression, she sensed her mistake. Yet as ever she was quick to retrieve the situation; she knew now on which side her bread was buttered.

"Please drive on, Leonard dear," placing herself, "I think I served that awful creature perfectly, and I'm glad you taught him a lesson. So sorry," she assured Tuck, "that I can't stop to be introduced to your friend. She looks so unusual."

Tuck did not even hear her. He was staring at her.

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